

Freedom to Love, Freedom to Marry
February 15, 2009

Months ago, when I read on a Unitarian Universalist social witness calendar that this past Thursday was being set aside as Freedom to Marry Day, I committed in that moment to make this Sunday, the day after Valentine's Day, a day in which I would address love in the context of marriage equality for gay and lesbian people. I thought to myself, Unitarian Universalists have taken a leading role for years, decades really, on equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. If it weren't for Unitarian Universalists, I probably wouldn't be a minister today; it's time I step up to the plate and do my part. So yesterday, having read various materials, having thought a bit on my own life and the lives of people I love, I sat down to my computer, ready to just eloquently, gaily let flow whatever it was I would be moved to

share with you this morning about love, marriage, and queer people.

But certain memories started slipping into my mind, and I started getting led down paths I hadn't really meant to go. For instance, while I haven't yet seen the movie *Milk*, about the life of gay activist and San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk, I did pick up a biography of him recently, and finished it this past Friday night. All along, as I read the book, I had this one image that kept appearing, of me, looking through my thirteen year-old eyes, at the headlines of the *Oregonian*, my local newspaper, and reading that San Francisco mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk had been shot and killed in San Francisco's City Hall. Somewhere in that memory, somewhere in my thirteen-year old self, whether I read it in the article or I just felt it in my heart, I knew that the deaths had something to do with Harvey Milk being a gay man.

Revisiting this tragedy as an adult, reading of police chanting about the murderer, “Dan White Is All Right!,” reading about the mockery of a jury selection and trial procedures, revisiting this blatant injustice added an adult understanding and anger and sorrow that my younger self might not have been able to articulate.

And there are other memories as well, which my journey to that era and that event, brought forth. When I was younger, maybe eight, nine, ten, there were two men who lived up the street from my family in a nice modern house, and I would often watch them as they drove by *my* house in their little Dodge Dart. They were known as the Something brothers. I can’t remember the last name they shared, but they were definitely known as the Something *brothers*. And I remember looking at them as they drove by, seeing the resemblance between the two, especially their graying hair and beards,

maybe they both wore glasses, wondering who was older, maybe they were twins, but seeing also that they looked not all *that* much alike.

Then one day, in the *Oregonian* again, there they were, in the Living section, the first couple to be featured in a week-long series about homosexuals living in Portland. In the story, the two men told about how, for years, they had presented themselves to their neighbors as brothers, but that now they were finally coming out as the couple that they were. My little ten year-old or so mind worked curiously and cautiously with this paradigm shift.

Then there was the “religious” memory. For a time, my mother was a receptionist at the campus ministry office at Portland State University. As her child, I came to know all the ministers there, the Lutheran one, the Episcopalian one, the Catholic one, and the one named Art. I don’t remember his

denomination. But I do remember that he, his wife and two kids would sometimes come to our house for dinner. Then, one year, Art left his wife. For a man. I didn't quite know how to take in the information that Art had left his wife, and therefore his children, as a minister, for a man. Would he still get to be a minister? My mind quietly reeled. My mother, who'd always fairly easily befriended gay men, remained friends with Art for years after that.

Lesbians, on the other hand, she wasn't so great about. When I was, again, about thirteen years old, I asked her once (and I don't know where I got the courage or audacity or *compulsion* to ask her this) I asked if she knew of any women who had ever been in love with her. She told me that in college, back in the 1940s, she and a friend used to always ride the bus together. Then one day this friend told my mom

she was in love with her. “After that,” my mom told me, “I never rode the bus with her again.”

And then there’s the memory about the river. I’d say I was probably, again, somewhere around nine or ten, and my mom, my stepdad at the time, my brother and I were traveling through Oregon, on our way back home to Portland. We stopped at a river, at a point where the river cut deep into a canyon. High up on the canyon’s ledge, we leaned over the railing, looking down, down, down. It was at that moment that my mother told me about the woman who, at this very spot, had thrown her children into the river, so she could be with her lesbian lover.

I’m still not sure what the moral of that story was supposed to be. Perhaps it was a warning against lesbian lovers, mothers, inconvenient children, or... lesbians to be. I’m seventeen, in love with my first girlfriend, and clandestinely

holding her hand in the darkened auditorium as members of my all girls Catholic high school theater group perform a production of Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*. In the play, two women, headmistresses at a private school, are accused of being lovers. One, too tormented by the truth of her own feelings for her friend that this rumor reveals, shoots herself dead. I remember how the sound of the gun shot made me jump in my seat, and in my heart. What would become of me?

Well, this is what has become of me, standing here telling these stories. And still I haven't really gotten to the topic of love. I'd wanted to simply weave marriage equality into the scarlet, chocolaty, rosey, Valentiney *celebration* of love. But here I am working through the stories of people and of years past. Why? Because the history of second class citizenry is a long, painful, lonely, and tragic one. We know that, have read

about it, witnessed it, maybe even wept over it in the stories of women and of people of color striving for their rights in this country and around the world. Maybe we remember, as Congressman and former civil rights leader John Lewis does, the days when “30 states had bans on interracial marriage... saying they were against the definition of marriage, against God’s law.” Imagine where we’d be if those laws still held.

But how many of us, as much as we love our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, how many of us have really sat down and felt, down to our very souls, what the struggle for gay and lesbian people has been like throughout the years? How many of us have really *smelled*, in the treatment of gay and lesbian people, in John Lewis’ words, “the stink of the same fear, hatred, and intolerance” that Lewis and so many others have known “in racism and bigotry”?

I've got my own stories of struggle, and some of you, I imagine, have yours. Good thing we have this place in which to reflect. Maybe some of us first came to this church because we felt our stories would begin to change here, that, to quote Marjorie Bowens Wheatley, we could, "recognizing the interdependence of all life, strive to build community," and so be saved. Maybe some of us realized that here, "the pain of our aloneness [would] be lessened."

Gladly, we have the collective story, here, of welcoming people of all sexual orientations into this beloved religious community. Joyfully, very joyfully, we have the very recent memory of Kathy and Sara, telling their own story of love, right here from this pulpit, in a service that sent us all into shedding tears of love and compassion, gratitude, and belonging. Thank you, Kathy and Sara. In a way, your story is

the Valentine's Day story I think I'd hoped to tell today. You beat me to it! How excellent it came from your own souls.

And how excellent that so many people in this community have their hearts and souls wrapped warmly around a brother, sister, daughter, son, father, mother, other family member or friend who is gay. As you are willing, would those of you who have a friend or family member—or *self*—who is gay or lesbian, please stand?

Thank you. Thank you for your love.

Now, speaking of standing, how do we take a stand? How do we, in the words of Unitarian Universalist Association President Bill Sinkford, stand on the side of love? We've already done a great deal. We've marched against state constitutional amendments denying gay citizens of Texas equal rights. Raise your hand if you participated in that. We've become an official Welcoming Congregation, which means we

took the time and energy and soul searching to certify ourselves within the Unitarian Universalist Association as a congregation that welcomes lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. Raise your hands if you've helped with that. Some of us go to the annual memorial vigil for transgender people who have been murdered simply because they were who they were. Raise your hand if you've attended that. And some of us—gay, straight, and everywhere in between—march at the annual gay pride parade. Raise your hand if you've been to that.

Now, as one more step to show support for the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender community, here is something *I* am promising, on this day, to do. It's nothing new. Many Unitarian Universalist ministers, gay and straight, have chosen this path, as have some other liberal religious leaders. What I promise to do is decline, from this day on, to sign any

marriage license until I can sign a marriage license that formalizes marriages for same-sex couples as well as for heterosexual couples. This doesn't mean I won't perform marriage ceremonies. I will happily continue to officiate at the wedding ceremonies of heterosexual as well as same-sex couples, and will explain to them well beforehand my stance. But those heterosexual couples who are married by me in religious ceremony will simply need to ask a justice of the peace or other appropriate official to sign off on the license. This may be a small inconvenience for them. But hopefully one they will understand, be willing to endure, and support for the message it carries.

Because, in the meantime, the literal thousands of inconveniences that same-sex couples potentially face, by not being legally married, include, according to the Freedom to Marry website:

- Hospital visitation when there's an accident or illness
- The ability to obtain "family" health coverage
- Taxation and inheritance rights
- Protection in case the relationship ends

The website continues, "Sometimes [members of same-sex couples] see their children taken away, or their role as parents denied. Regardless of the fact that they have taken responsibility for their children's and their partner's well-being, both economically and emotionally, *legally* their status is, at best, that of a roommate." By the way, you may have heard talk show host Ellen Degeneres recently at an awards ceremony thank her "roommate" Portia de Rossi.... That was a jab at the fact that they had legally married in California last summer, only to have the joy of that union pulled out from under them with the passing of Proposition 8.

While we need humor like Degeneres' (or at least, while I do!), the seriousness of the matter is palpable in the reading we heard Gerry share earlier, when John Lewis states that "the government's exclusion of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters from civil marriage officially degrades them and their families. It denies them the basic human right to marry the person they love."

For those of you who are married, for those of you who have lived through years together of marriage and raising children and building a home and aging together and deepening your love for each other, imagine being denied the basic human right to have married that person you love. How would your lives be different today? Same-sex couples simply want the same things you do: They want to commit to each other, they want to be able to take care of and be responsible

for each other and their families. They want—*we* want—to love each other, openly, freely, joyfully, and without fear.

So, recognizing indeed the interdependence of all life, let us continue to strive to build community, and let us thus be saved from the pain of our aloneness. Let us love our gay and lesbian friends. Let us love our own children, and whoever and however *they* will grow to love. May it be that we create for them memories of belonging, justice, community, family, and deep, abiding love. Happy Valentines Day.

Amen.